

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

EDITOR: **Nikolas K. Gvosdev** *www.nationalinterest.org*

• 1615 L Street, N.W. • Suite 1230 • Washington, D.C. 20036 •  
• (202) 467-4884 • Fax (202) 467-0006 • [editor@nationalinterest.org](mailto:editor@nationalinterest.org) •

---

## THE NATIONAL INTEREST

---

**Number 96 • Jul./Aug. 2008**

No part of this article may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except:

- one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use; or
- with prior written permission of THE NATIONAL INTEREST.

THE NATIONAL INTEREST (ISSN 0884-9382) is published bi-monthly by the The National Interest, Inc., with the cooperation of The Nixon Center. Contact THE NATIONAL INTEREST for further permission regarding the use of this work.

Copyright © 2008 by The National Interest, Inc. All rights reserved.

HONORARY CHAIRMAN *Henry A. Kissinger* CHAIRMAN, ADVISORY COUNCIL *James Schlesinger*  
PUBLISHER *Dimitri K. Simes* ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER *Paul J. Saunders* CONTRIBUTING EDITORS *Ian Bremmer •*  
*Ted Galen Carpenter • John Hulsman • Ray Takeyh • Aluf Benn • Alexey Pushkov • Greg Sheridan • Pang Zhongying*  
ADVISORY BOARD *Morton Abramowitz • Graham Allison • Robert F. Ellsworth • Martin Feldstein • Leslie H. Gelb • Fred C. Iklé •*  
*John J. Mearsheimer • Daniel Pipes • David B. Rivkin, Jr. • Helmut Sonnenfeldt • John H. Taylor • J. Robinson West • Dov Zakheim*

# McCain's Choice

---

Derek Chollet & James Goldgeier

---

SENATOR JOHN McCain (R-AZ) may describe himself as a “realistic idealist,” but this formulation does little to paper over the very real schism among Republicans (and conservatives in general) about the future direction of U.S. foreign policy. McCain has assembled a diverse group of advisors for his campaign, but should he win the presidency this fall, he will have to choose between two markedly different approaches to guiding America in the world.

In the aftermath of the Bush administration, particularly the impact of the war in Iraq, conservative politicians and policy intellectuals are again debating the nature of the global order, the purpose and use of American power, and what, if anything, is required to legitimize the exercise of that power, particularly military force. What is striking is the extent to which the divide between the two broad groupings in

---

Derek Chollet is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and James Goldgeier is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a professor at George Washington University. They are coauthors of *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (PublicAffairs, 2008).

the McCain campaign (the pragmatists or realists on one hand and the idealists or neoconservatives on the other) resembles the divisions that had emerged in the closing days of the George H. W. Bush administration—and the continuing relevance of two documents, one produced by then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney’s Pentagon, the other developed by the James Baker/Lawrence Eagleburger State Department.

The former, the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), has been widely discussed, and many have linked the ideas of its authors in the early 1990s to the 2002 National Security Strategy and the subsequent war in Iraq. The other was a lengthy personal memorandum sent by outgoing-Secretary of State Eagleburger to his Democratic successor, Warren Christopher, in January 1993—a document that, in contrast to the DPG, was never released or leaked to the public.<sup>1</sup>

Both memoranda are equally indispensable guides to understanding the splits that opened among conservatives

---

MOST CONSERVATIVES  
often look back to the Reagan  
years as a kind of nirvana of GOP  
consensus. . . .

---

---

<sup>1</sup>The authors were shown a copy of this memo and have submitted a Freedom of Information Act request for its full declassification.

in the early 1990s, simmered throughout the decade, exploded into the open again in 2001, and are alive and well as conservatives contemplate a post-Bush foreign policy in 2009 and beyond.

The DPG was the U.S. government's first effort to sketch a comprehensive strategy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Drafted principally by Undersecretary Paul Wolfowitz's aide Zalmay Khalilzad, the document reflected the collective thinking of Wolfowitz and his staff, including I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Stephen Hadley and Eric Edelman, a formidable group with significant national-security expertise. It laid out very clearly how America should think now that the cold war was over—and set as its objective ensuring American primacy for the foreseeable future by preventing any other power from posing "a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union." Not only should the United States retain its formidable military advantages, it also recommended that the United States "endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power." It was a strategy designed to cement American hegemony by making sure that no other state or group of states could constrain U.S. freedom of action around the globe, as the USSR had done during the cold war.

The presumption is that, had George H. W. Bush been reelected in 1992, the Defense Planning Guidance would have been the prevailing policy of his second term. But not everyone in the administration was impressed. General Brent Scowcroft, then the national-security advisor, recalled, "That was just nutty. I read a draft of it. I thought, Cheney, this is just kooky. It didn't go anywhere further. It was never formally reviewed." As Scowcroft's blunt reaction to the document makes clear, many inside the first Bush administration held a very different

worldview. Even though the Bush administration had run out of time, in late 1992 State Department officials quietly set out to develop a strategy to reflect the other perspective.

What they came up with reflected a far-more-humble view of U.S. power and greater hopes for building international coalitions. Compared with the DPG, the State Department effort offered a more-complete picture of the complex challenges that the United States would face: threats emanating from disintegrating states, the greater role of international economics, transnational dilemmas such as weapons proliferation and climate change, and a U.S. domestic environment more skeptical of sacrifice for engagement abroad. Although Eagleburger spent only a brief time at the helm at the State Department, he was a major presence inside the administration and had close relationships with Bush and Scowcroft. William Burns, an extremely able young career diplomat who was then acting director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff (and who went on to serve in senior State Department posts, including as ambassador to Russia and now undersecretary for political affairs) helped write the draft.

A core proposition of Eagleburger's memo was that the United States needed to become the "provider of reassurance and architect of new security arrangements . . . [and] a builder and leader of coalitions to deal with problems in the chaotic post-Cold War world." It described the threat from the spread of weapons of mass destruction as the "central security challenge" and outlined rising concerns about nontraditional threats, including the environment and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The Eagleburger memo also raised several realist-inspired caveats. Humanitarian crises would "confront us with the dilemma of whether to take part in

---

DESPITE ITS grand assertions, the George W. Bush administration did not provide a new enduring Republican paradigm for foreign policy.

---

limited military interventions in situations which do not directly threaten our interests. . . .” Spreading democracy was a worthwhile goal but the memo warned that if democratizing societies “fail to produce the fruits of reform quickly,” they might slide into other “isms”—nationalism or religious extremism or some combination. Finally, it also warned of a threat from extreme Islamic movements in the Middle East: “In much of the world, including parts that are very important strategically for us, Islamic conservatism remains a potent alternative to democracy as an organizing principle.”

Although hardly a complete repudiation of Cheney’s defense strategy, the Eagleburger memo did sketch a far-different view of the purpose and use of U.S. power. Cheney wanted the United States to remain the preeminent world power by keeping others at bay and bending the world to its wishes. Eagleburger saw American preeminence as leading by example and inspiring others to join the U.S.-led order. These competing perspectives certainly reflect differences in philosophy, but perhaps the most-important distinction concerns the contours of the new global landscape and the constraints of the American political system. One strategy defined the world largely by traditional concepts—states and threats. The other considered the world’s complexity and how the very concept of security was evolving.

TODAY, MCCAIN inherits the worldviews conveyed in both memos as he shapes his own vision of foreign affairs. Certainly, the two perspectives are not completely incompatible. (After all, not all the drafters of the DPG were even neoconservatives.) For example, the DPG’s authors would agree with Eagleburger’s concern about Islamic radicalism as a threat to democracy. Elements of the Eagleburger memo that call for a “concept” for humanitarian intervention, including such practical steps as creating American military units that could be drawn upon for UN missions or joint training at U.S. facilities, a more-comprehensive nonproliferation strategy, a new foreign-aid system and a massive overhaul of Washington’s national-security institutions have been echoed more recently by people usually classed as neoconservatives.

McCain’s proposal to create a League of Democracies is an interesting hybrid of the two perspectives, one that symbolizes his effort to be a “realistic idealist” (this proposal also has the support of many prominent liberal thinkers). It would rely on U.S. leadership of a multilateral organization based on a community of values. But even that idea demonstrates the likely limits of collaboration among the two groups. Realists see a world where the United States needs to reach out to major nondemocracies such as China and Russia for assistance in combating a number of pressing threats, especially terrorism. The idealists, meanwhile, believe that the lack of democracy in China and Russia is itself a major problem and places real limits on America’s ability to engage in any sort of meaningful cooperation with them. These are fundamental differences in approach. This is why Eagleburger, now an advisor to McCain, recently told the *New York Times* that “it may be too strong a term to say a fight is going on over John McCain’s soul . . . [but] I am convinced there is at least going to be an

attempt.”

If McCain wins the presidency, then presumably we will hear more about how “realistic idealism” navigates these problems, but many observers predict a foreign policy of incoherence and division. The moment a President McCain starts going after leaders in Beijing and Moscow for their authoritarian ways, the realists will panic and look to the American business community to prevent a breakdown in relations. And if he goes easy on the Chinese, as some accused Bill Clinton of doing during his presidency, the neoconservatives will feel betrayed and start agitating, as they did in the 1990s, for conservatives to develop a “neo-Reaganite” foreign policy. Ultimately, McCain will find that on issues such as climate change or Iran where he needs Russia and China, he will have to deal with them. He won’t be able to kick Russia out of the G-8, as he has said the United States should consider doing. Standing up for values can (and should) remain an important part of foreign policy, but McCain will inevitably have to compromise if he wants to make progress to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, for example.

A future McCain administration, therefore, may sorely test the fragile consensus of the Republican Party’s foreign-policy establishment. Although Republican unity after the September 11 attacks appeared to be enduring, deep splits have reemerged over time, largely thanks to Iraq, creating problems for McCain today. More conservatives find themselves questioning the wisdom of Bush’s aspiration to promote democracy and are urging a return to a policy based more on interests than values. “The neoconservatives—the Republicans who argued most fervently for the second Gulf war—believe in the export of democracy, by violence if that is required,” Scowcroft told one reporter. “How do the neocons bring democracy to Iraq? You invade, you

threaten and pressure, you evangelize.” Iraq, argued the former national-security advisor, “feeds terrorism.” Richard Haass, a former official in both Bush administrations and now president of the Council on Foreign Relations, added, “The emphasis on promotion of democracy, the emphasis on regime change, the war of choice in Iraq—all of these are departures from the traditional approach, so it’s not surprising to me that it generates more reaction.” And former-House Speaker Newt Gingrich has suggested, “We are a culturally imperial society but not a politically imperial one. We have no interest in running the planet, we just want to shape it.”

In some ways, conservative thinking on foreign policy has always been less unified than many think. While most conservatives often look back to the Reagan years as a kind of nirvana of GOP consensus, the foreign-policy debates inside Reagan’s administration were marked by intense and often well-publicized battles between pragmatists who believed in negotiating with the Soviets and hard-liners intent on confronting the evil empire—struggles that Reagan successfully traversed. It is not yet clear whether McCain would be able to do the same.

Moreover, these fights are now playing out under the hot lights of the presidential campaign, where political journalists and policy pundits are puzzling over which advisors have the candidate’s ear on foreign policy. Whether McCain wins or loses in November, these divisions will make it difficult for the Republicans to reclaim the mantle of national-security gurus that they held during the latter half of the cold war, when their unity against the forces of Communism stood in stark contrast to the splits among liberals about combating Soviet influence.

Maintaining stability and staying out of other people’s business unless it is absolutely necessary for U.S. interests was typically the default position for the Re-

publican Party, so one would expect the realists should have the upper hand, particularly since Iraq will not be an example anyone would wish to follow (or the beacon of democratic transformation in the Middle East) anytime soon. But the neo-conservatives tap into the idealist strain of the American people, which makes their views a potent force even when, as in the early 1990s, their actual numbers are extremely small.

Does McCain have the option of turning to other senior Republicans to help mediate these divisions? Who can possibly reconcile these two groups? Realists Brent Scowcroft and James Baker remain party elders, but their influence in Republican politics is waning. Neo-conservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith are too politically radioactive. Dick Cheney will soon join Donald Rumsfeld in retirement. And independent moderates like Senators Richard Lugar (R-IN) and Chuck Hagel (R-NE) often find themselves isolated from their colleagues.

And if McCain loses in November, conservatives will have no obvious standard-bearer—and one can expect that the recriminations will be so fierce that it could take years for the Republican Party to overcome them. Its fate might prove similar to that of the Democrats after the early 1970s. Many national-security thinkers left the party altogether and joined the Reagan revolution. Others tried to keep the Truman/Kennedy legacy alive in the Democratic Party but were marginalized for years. Only now Democrats seem to be overcoming their national-security handicaps, with foreign policy now widely accepted as part of liberalism's core.

Despite its grand assertions, the George W. Bush administration did not provide a new enduring Republican paradigm for foreign policy. Indeed, the party has been unable to find its moorings on foreign policy ever since the Soviet collapse, and nothing about this election will change that. If anything, the problem could easily grow worse. □

CAMBRIDGE

## What if the critics, pundits, and armchair politicians have got it WRONG?

**“Lynch and Singh demolish a great many of the dozens of myths and misconceptions that have become the conventional wisdom about the Bush administration’s response to terrorism, the decision to go into Iraq and the thinking and influence of neoconservatives. It will take many more such books to balance the mountain of nonsense that has been piled up by ideologically driven academics and a huge flock of journalistic sheep. They should be congratulated for having made a start.”**

—Richard Perle, Fellow, American Enterprise Institute and Former Assistant Secretary of Defense



Now nearing the end of George W. Bush's second term, it appears his foreign policy has won few admirers, with pundits and politicians eagerly and opportunistically bashing the tenets of the Bush Doctrine. In this provocative account, authors Timothy J. Lynch and Robert S. Singh dare to counter the dogma of Bush's Beltway detractors and his ideological enemies, boldly arguing that Bush's policy deservedly belongs within the mainstream of the American foreign policy tradition. Providing a positive audit of the war on terror, which they contend should be understood as a Second Cold War, they charge that the Bush Doctrine is consistent with past foreign policies.

Though the shifting tide of public opinion has led many to anticipate that Bush's successor will repudiate the actions of the past eight years, the authors suggest that, regardless of the outcome in November's election, there will—and should—be continuity in US foreign policy from his Presidency to those who follow.

[www.cambridge.org/us](http://www.cambridge.org/us)

 CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS